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## **Shouting on Social Media? A borderscapes perspective on a contentious hashtag**

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### **Abstract**

This article extends the concept of *borderscapes* to understand the role of hashtags, a social media content sorting device, in organizing public conversations on important social issues. We examine a highly contentious hashtag, shout your abortion, to unpick how a hashtag denotes the contours of diverse “the us” and “the other” positions around a contested socio-political issue. A thematic analysis of the hashtag over a two-year period reveals complex dynamics of un/doing of symbolic lines via three main mechanisms: positions, signposting terms of belonging, and re-stating normativity. Using *borderscapes* concept as a theoretical lens, we show that the hashtag does not merely denotes existing competing positions and dividing lines but is a fluid space, where multifarious points and lines of differentiation are articulated, contested, and consolidated. This study advances the current discussions on acculturation via social media by elaborating the notion of *borderscapes* in relation to hashtags, thus offering a more nuanced understanding of polarisation and partisan selectivity, the processes inhibiting the encounters with social-cultural others, which are pivotal to acculturation.

**key words:** borderscape, contentious hashtag, othering, positions, social ordering, normativity

## Introduction

The original premise and promise of the internet, and later social media, was connectedness of people, ideas, and places (see Barlow 1996). “Borderless” was a commonly used descriptor of the Internet to hail its potentiality of transcending physical boundaries and borders, meeting people from ‘other words’ and hearing a wide range of ideas. In 2010, Hilary Clinton affirmed the ideal of the borderless internet in her agenda declaration for the US State Department, stating that free flow of information and exchange of ideas regardless of frontiers are paramount to promoting democracy and supporting “peace and security” globally (cited in Moskowitz 2017). The internet freedom thesis presumed that an open access to expressive means and a broad exposure to competing ideas necessarily widens democratic participation and favours values of equality, opportunity, responsibility, and cooperation. Today, however, the phrase “borderless internet” is more often than not paired with “myths”, “misguided,” and “fails” (ibid.; York 2015). Instead, words “borders” and “boundaries”, “control” “prevent,” and “block” are now firmly in conversation about social media and ‘information warfare,’ polarisation, and segregation, which transpire therein (Sunstein 2017). Indeed, recent “real-world consequences” of social media made “digital borders” a priority agenda (Clinton in Moskowitz 2017). In short, we are presently witnessing a turn from the ideals of borderless towards ‘build that [fire] wall!,’ not only in policies but in popular media and among wider publics on social media, where many voice a concern over the ‘architectures’ of social media, from proprietary algorithms and bots to memes and hashtags, that are increasingly used to divide, influence, and agitate (Gillespie 2014; Pasquale 2015; Striplas 2015).

In this article, we are interested in hashtag and the ways this content sorting device is implicated in polarisation, segregation and separation on social media. We take the case of #ShoutYourAbortion (SYA hereafter), a highly contentious hashtag which attracted international media attention<sup>1</sup>. As we illustrate below, SYA represents a rich context to unpick how a hashtag denotes the contours of diverse positionings around a contested socio-political issue. Following recent interdisciplinary discussions on social media, public sphere, and society (e.g., Sunstein 2017; Steiner and Waisbord 2017; Tierney 2013), we aim to understand how this hashtag affords/prevents public dialogue and social exchange, and dis/connects people,

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<sup>1</sup> The story of SYA was covered by the international press, including, amongst others, The Guardian, The New York Times, The Independent, Los Angeles Times, The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, as well as websites of Elle magazine, The CNN, The BBC, various blogs, BuzzFeed and Wikipedia.

thus relates to social media's ability to shape publics, including in terms of identities of "the us" and "the others." For this purpose, we draw on the scholarship in cultural geography and critical border studies and introduce the notion of *borderscapes*, culturally constructed, discursively constituted, and dynamic fields of varied and differentiated encounters with 'the stranger and the foreigner' (Brambilla 2015; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). We believe this concept can be usefully mobilized to think through hashtags, and social media in the context of acculturation because: (1) notion of border has always been pivotal to the acculturation construct (e.g., Penaloza 1994); (2) much of the current debate around social media policies centres upon the idea of borders, thus warranting a deeper theoretical look into the notion, and (2) the concept provides a productive new perspective on hashtag as a (social) ordering space. In particular, conceiving of hashtags in terms of *borderscapes* allows us complexify the view of hashtags as signposts, that either draw people in or away, as such act as obstacles to social exchange, which exist along the continuum from homophile (social tendency to seek similar) to filters-bubbles (technological and marketing segmentation) (Sunstein 2017). We submit that hashtags do not only organize a social conversation but consolidate, conceivably even transform, it around key terms that incline individuals towards particular formulations of their views and dispose them to certain positions on a social matter, thus hashtags are implicated in acculturation and even possibly in (re)ordering the social.

Research into the use of hashtags on Twitter and other social media platforms developed rapidly following the Arab Spring and Occupy protests that foregrounded the role of hashtags in informing publics, coordinating activists' campaigns, and expressing support (e.g., Bruns et al. 2013; Juris 2012; Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012). *Feminist Media Studies*' "Commentaries and Criticism" collections aptly illustrate a diverse and vibrant swathe of scholarship on the subject (Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 2014; 2015); researchers explored broadly the phenomenon of hashtags and their significance in breaking news, communicating with dispersed publics during crisis events, and in publicity efforts by celebrities, politicians, or charities. Of note here are the studies that examined the ways hashtags feature in raising awareness and shaping public sentiment around various social issues, events, and ideas (e.g., Dragiewicz and Burgess 2016; Rodgers and Scobie 2015; Stout 2016). For example, in the study of #Ferguson, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) trace how the hashtag was used to both document and challenge the incidents of police brutality in the wake of shooting the unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri. The authors argue that strategic use of hashtags, while seems like "disembodied engagement," brought attention to the racial politics,

the arbitrary nature of racialized policing and the misrepresentations of racialized bodies in media, and fostered solidarities. Similarly, Jane (2017) investigates a feminist campaign against everyday sexism, presented by #manspreading hashtag, which aimed to highlight a habitual way men occupy space in public transport. In appraising the efficacy of the campaign, the author notes that the hashtag marked antagonisms, as it spurred an array of counter-responses, including from men's rights activists. Overall, the research points to a powerful way the hashtags are engaged in social debates and reveals that hashtags are not only markers, indicating a gathering of like-minded people (e.g., Sunstein 2017), but are amplifiers, flagging the important issues for a wider public and making them discussable (Stout 2016).

We aim to extend this line of inquiry into social usage of hashtags. Toward this end, we take the case of SYA and explore the usage of this hashtag in denoting the contours of diverse positions around a contested socio-political issue. We show that, though seemingly self-evident, the hashtag is constituted in multifarious exchanges, thus caught up and enacts complex dynamics of collaboration, solidarity, and confrontation. Through our discussion of the SYA case, we suggest that viewing hashtags as *borderscapes* enables a more nuanced understanding of polarisation and partisan selectivity, the processes inhibiting encounters with social-cultural others (Bump 2016; Sunstein 2017). The article makes two key contributions to previous literatures. First, we introduce the notion of *borderscapes* to demonstrate that hashtag is not a merely sorting device - means of creating and maintaining ad hoc social groupings (ibid.), but a "fluid field", where points of differentiation are articulated, fleshed out, and contested, and the dividing lines are continuously (re)drawn (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). Our findings concur with the critical border studies, which assert that socially-politically divisive issues, however obvious they and opposing parties therein might seem, are not readily given but are in flux and relational (ibid.). Specifically, our analysis of SYA points to a multiplicity of knowledges, ethical and normative parameters, evoked to claim, counter-claim, and reclaim the positions of us/others, in/exclusion and non/belonging around this hashtag. Second, our study contributes to the scholarship on borders and *borderscapes* by exploring distinct expressive artefacts of new media – hashtags, as everyday "bordering, ordering and othering" practices (van Houtm and van Naerssen 2001). We unpack how boundary lines of social otherness are (re)formulated in and across the SYI hashtag. Our work responds to the call to "dis-locate and re-locate borders [and] reflect on the multiplication of border forms" (Brambilla 2015), in doing so we expose bordering as it unfolds in the 'de-territorialised' space, that is social media. While social media, and transnational flows of technology, media, and

ideas therein, perhaps indeed erodes geopolitical boundaries (as proponents of “digital borders” state, see Moskowitz 2017), socio-ideological sorting and classifying of people, ideas, and cultures online persists and appears as intense and vitriolic as along some nation-state borders.

The article is organized as follows. First, we explain the notion of *borderscapes* which we posit as novel theoretical lens to investigate the social usage of hashtags. We draw from the work in cultural geography and critical border studies to guide our methodological approach and analysis. We then elaborate the SYA case and trace the articulation of varied socio-ideological positions through critical examination of comments in the Twitter hashtag stream. In our discussion, we locate our work within the current debates around the issues of polarisation and public dialogue on social media. Finally, our conclusions are accompanied by some suggestions for further inquiry.

### **Theoretical Lens: Concept of Borderscapes**

The concept of *borderscapes* is a fairly recent one; its coinage marked a qualitative evolution of the concept of borders which began in the 1990s when, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and amidst the accelerated processes of globalization, the ideal of a ‘borderless’ world seemed like a real possibility. At the time, some borders were dismantled and others were disputed anew, the understanding of borders as naturalized territorial structures was giving way to the focus on borders as sociocultural and political practices (Brambilla 2015; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009; van Houtum et al. 2005). In places where division lines were no longer physically demarcated and heavily policed, borders continued to be central to various types of social-cultural formations, and to personal, communal and national identity projects (e.g., Strüver 2005). These observations made imperative a rethinking of the concept. Furthermore, a partial dissolution of traditional borders due to intensification of transnational financial, technological, and media flows (Appadurai 1996), also required a conceptual shift in understanding of borders (Johnson et al 2011). The notion of *borderscapes*, therefore, was proposed to capture and convey the change in understanding and reality of borders overtime, and to foreground the sense that borders are socially constructed, constantly (re)defined, and dynamic, in answer to economic and socio-political interests (Brambilla 2015).

There is no standard definition of *borderscapes*, partly because the notion emerged in debates on limitations of the existing concept to address a changing empirical reality and to account for

multiplications of border forms across social arenas as well as complexification of bordering processes (Brambilla 2015; Johnson et al 2011; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009). What is common to the earlier uses of the term is the desire to move away from a territorial view of borders, where they are a static result of divisions and differentiations, and instead conceive of borders as material and discursive constructions, constitutive of their effects (ibid; Strüver 2005; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). That is, borders are not only outcomes but the reasons for differentiations. Borders are part of social processes and practices of differentiation because they regulate movements and serve to separate people, cultures, and nations. But also, borders shape identities (of individual and community) at various levels by delimiting and enacting in/exclusions, including ethical ones. Notably, a regulative frame therein is not fixed, instead shifting - an interplay of claims and counter-claims, involving competing meanings, a range of actors, and multiple histories. Such nature of borders is strongly evident in a study of the Australian borders, which Perera (2007) finds, are continuously in flux: different ideas are (re)formulated, “allegiances and loyalties are remade, [and] identities are consolidated and challenged.” As Brambilla (2015: 19) further explains, border is “established and at the same time continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships that highlight endless definitions and shifts in definition between inside and outside”. This insight informs the conceptualisation of *borderscapes* that we adopt and seek to advance in our study.

In particular, we follow Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007: xxviii), who in their book *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge* summarise Perera's (2007) discussion to define *borderscape* as a fluid field of “variated and differentiated encounters,” not tied to or contained in a specific place, rather “recognizable ... in struggles to clarify inclusion from exclusion.” Put differently, this definition decentres border as an entity, and places emphasis on affirmative and subversive social interactions. Thus, *borderscapes* is about what is socio-culturally permitted or prohibited, and speaks to a society, its ideologies and histories. This understanding renders the notion of *borderscapes* operational in any social arena, where social differentiation occurs, and thus relevant to research interested in border phenomena and conditions of their formations in array of contexts, beyond geopolitics (Sidaway 2011).

Two aspects of *borderscapes* make the concept fitting and productive in the context of social media acculturation to “others,” be it people, views, or cultures. First, a conceptual affinity with Appadurai's (1996) typology of –scapes (a set of global disjunctive cultural flows of ideas,

people, media, technology, and finances), means that the *borderscapes* concept is aligned with the view of social media as a relational space where exchanges are global but also uneven, fluid, and temporal (see Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 2014; 2015). Moreover, in line with Appadurai's conception, *borderscapes* is characterised by the 'perspectival' dimension, which Brambilla (2015: 22) defines as "a set of relations that ...vary in accordance with the point of view adopted [and] which changes with the fluctuation of historical, social, cultural, and political events" (also Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007; Rumford 2012). As such, *borderscapes* highlights the complexity of interactions and requires going beyond us/other, centre/margins, and so on –type of binaries (endemic to the discussions of social media polarisation) to consider a multiplicity of overlapping, irregular and fragmented encounters. Second, *borderscapes* draws attention to the vitality of dividing lines, which are neither already given nor could be taken-for-granted. Drawing on Ranciere's (2004) theory of rights, Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007: xxiv) posit that central to *borderscapes* is an understanding of society as a process, where order is always contingent and "the border between norm and exception, belonging and non-belonging is in a state of flux and dispute." Then, not only is *borderscapes* relevant to the growing concern over social (re)productive practices, afforded by social media that shape subjectivities in a certain way (Cappellini and Yen 2016) but enables a productive understanding of dispersed, fragmentary, and contradictory encounters at/across (divisive) political, social, cultural issues. These encounters, however haphazard define non/belonging, as such make visible (in sense of discussable in the public sphere (Stout 2016)) the usually imperceptible processes of doing and undoing symbolic boundaries that sustain the existing social order. Thus, the encounters reveal fluid and contextual nature of these boundaries, thus set the conditions of possibility for questioning to the predetermined categorisation of belonging, the us and the others.

Considered through the conceptual lens of *borderscapes*, hashtags can be viewed as located within a specific bundle of social relations that continuously interact. Hashtag then is not merely a marking device but involved in dynamic social processes and practices of differentiation and othering. The concept of *borderscapes* enables us to understand hashtags as essentially unstable, infused with multiple voices and movement (Brambilla 2015). This in turn encourages a 'genealogical' perspective on hashtags with focus on temporality and contesting interpretations of its meaning and appropriate use (ibid.). Furthermore, *borderscapes* emphasis on *becoming* brings attention to the constitutive role of hashtags; they are conceivably sites for articulation, adaptation, and contestations of ideas, identities, and non/belonging. This



reflection leads to a deeper understanding of various forms of contestation and rivalry (even violence!) that we see hashtags give rise to (see Williams 2015). But, with the *borderscapes* theoretical lens, even the most “boring” hashtag should be taken as ordering tool in a broader sense of maintaining, if not actively producing, normative in/exclusion (narratives, responsible for creating the us and the others) (Brambilla 2015; Strüver 2005). Put differently, the *borderscapes* notion when applied to hashtags invites analysis of the normative, “the ethical, legal and empirical premises and arguments used to justify particular cognitive and experiential regimes,” evoked in the processes of differentiation and identity constructions that take place at/across hashtags (Brambilla 2015: 20).

## Research section

The data corpus for our analysis are public Twitter messages ['tweets'] in which the hashtag *#shoutyourabortion* appeared at least once. Data were collected and analysed in four distinct phases: (a) familiarisation, (b) experimentation, (c) coding, and (d) thematic analysis.

The aim of phase one was to familiarise ourselves with the corpus. First, each researcher searched for the hashtag on Twitter and read through the most recent tweets on the Twitter *timeline* (a list of relates tweets with the choice to sort them by either 'relevance' or 'date'). Second, two researchers read though historic tweets using Twitter's 'advanced search' functionality. We specified several time frames and thus going back in time, were able to trace the origin of the *#shoutyourabortion* hashtag to 20<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

When reading through tweets on the *timeline*, we noticed that the average daily number of tweets with the *#shoutyourabortion* hashtag is fairly low, often fewer than ten tweets per day. We also noticed a considerably higher volume for the days when the hashtag first appeared. Because we relied on the *timeline* to read through the corpus, it was difficult for us to evaluate exactly how many tweets were published during that early period. We are aware that, as users we receive a curated view of tweets, filtered through Twitter's proprietary definition of 'relevance,' 'popular,' and 'newsworthy' (Gillespie 2014: 175). This understanding does not undermine our central concept. In the case of territorial borders, the notion of *borderscapes* assumes presence of hidden macro-structural influences, for example, of state and extra-governmental bodies (e.g., Bajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). Twitters proprietary algorithm of curating tweets constitutes a similar macro-structural influence, applied not to territorial borders but to the flow and visibility of information.

After we had familiarised ourselves with parts of the corpus, we experimented with forms of accessing historic tweets. The aim of this phase was to better understand how to access historic tweets, given a variety of technical, ethical, and practical challenges. As described, we started with accessing tweets through the timeline and followed up with using Twitter's APIs [Application Programming Interfaces] through which registered users are granted access to their database of tweets.

During that phase, two researchers also undertook an initial open coding exercise of some tweets. The aim of this exercise was to record our interpretation of the text for each tweet. In our analysis, we did not consider visual elements, including emoticons, videos and images. The result was a first set of coding frames that was subsequently applied to a larger data set.

We soon realised that the most practical way to access historic tweets (beyond a few hundred tweets per day) was to go through one of Twitter's commercial partners. We choose *DiscoverText*, an online service that offers paid access to tweets in combination with a proprietary analytics tool (for studies that have used the service, see Rossi and Giglietto 2016; Giglietto and Lee 2017; Michailidou 2017). We purchased access to 148,871 tweets for the period between 20<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> September 2015. A total of 42,300 tweets were identified for further analysis. These were tweets written in English and not repetitions of previous messages (retweets).

The initial open coding exercise was followed by the systematic coding of tweets from the first week of the hashtag's existence. The aim of this phase was to ensure a robust set of coding frames. Using *DiscoverText*, we coded a total of 25,432 tweets for the period 20<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> September 2015 (Table 1). While our focus was on that first week of activity, we manually coded an additional 646 tweets for the period between October 2015 and August 2017 (Table 2). We coded tweets available through the timeline for the 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, and 22<sup>nd</sup> of each month. This ensured that our coding frames were not unique to the first week of coding, but also applicable to tweets from subsequent periods.

	SAMPLE	CODED TWEETS
20 SEP 2015	100%	76
21 SEP 2015	100%	3072
22 SEP 2015	37.2% (random)	10000
23 SEP 2015	100%	6886

<b>24 SEP 2015</b>	100%	2720
<b>25 SEP 2015</b>	100%	1671
<b>26 SEP 2015</b>	100%	1007
<b>SUM</b>		<b>25432</b>

*Table 1. Number of coded tweets for each day during week 1. Note: A sample was taken for the 22<sup>nd</sup> September, where the overall volume of tweets was 26868.*

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>MONTHS</b>	<b>CODED TWEETS</b>
<b>2015</b>	October – December	314
<b>2016</b>	January – December	275
<b>2017</b>	January – August	57
<b>SUM</b>		<b>646</b>

*Table 2. Number of manually coded tweets for the 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> day of each month.*

Two researchers were involved in applying the initial coding frames. Their discussions led to a final set of five major frames: (a) Tweets describing personal experiences and stories related to abortion (coded as: *personal stories*); (b) tweets expressing feelings and opinions, but without reference to personal episodes, news or other external sources (*personal opinion*); (c) tweets commenting on abortion with reference to news and political events, mainly in the US (*media stories*); (d) tweets expressing opinions by way of reference to religious and secular sources or authorities, including the Bible, spiritual and moral figures, but also legal studies, studies of biology and medicine (*expert opinion*); and finally (e) tweets we excluded from our analysis (*ignored*). We excluded tweets that consisted entirely of images or links, were ambiguous, or repetitions of previous tweets.

Coding was followed by a thematic analysis. The aim of this phase was to analyse the coding frame in the context of previous studies on borderscapes. Applying the concept of borderscapes meant looking at the discursive and relational dimensions of each frame. Thus, each frame was thematically analysed with respect to what resources contributors employed in order to participate in the discussion and how they positioned themselves in relation to ‘the other’. Each frame was analysed separately and three themes ('positioning', 'othering', and 'normativity')

emerged and were compared across frames. The final interpretation of themes was the result of a back-and-forth between literature on borderscapes, individual and joined data analysis and interpretation.

Particular consideration was given to ethical implications that may arise from our research. Ethical approval for conducting this research was obtained from the authors' institution. Additionally, further steps were undertaken, since researchers doing online research face unique and unfamiliar ethical challenges (see e.g., by Procter et al. 2013; Zimmer and Proferes, 2014; Whiting and Pritchard 2017). Given that our research focus was on a tweet stream with a specific hashtag in *aggregate*—rather than on individual tweets—it was deemed unnecessary to seek informed consent for each tweet. Furthermore, being keenly aware of the sensitive nature of the SYA subject matter, we decided to refrain if possible from reproducing individual tweets. This is in order to minimise the risk of potential harm to those expressing their views on a sensitive and contested topic. However, since the conventions of qualitative research require verbatim quotes, we include a few tweets in our discussion, taking them from the media sources, which have published these tweets in their SYA coverage (for details of this existing practice see Bonilla and Rosa 2015). We believe that this limited inclusion of verbatim quotes does not compromise the strength of our argument and enables us to uphold our ethical commitments to protect the participants of the Twitter conversation. Overall, our study followed the ethical guidelines described by the *British Sociological Association*. These guidelines provide a comprehensive overview of ethical procedures set by a wide variety of research councils and professional bodies.

### **SYA: the hashtag over time**

We selected SYA as it epitomises some key characteristics of a contentious hashtag (Antonakis-Nashif 2015), where the divisive lines between 'us' and the 'other' appear obvious. Because of seeming obviousness, SYA is an ideal case to illustrate that a hashtag is a borderscape—not a marker of division but “a fluid field”—where us and the other, and the categories therein, are continuously (re)drawn (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). The hashtag was created by Lindy West, a Seattle-based writer, and Amelia Bonow on the 20<sup>th</sup> September 2015. Amelia Bonow wrote of her positive experience of having an abortion, first on Facebook and later with Lindy West on Twitter. The intent was to protest against the US House

Representative voting to defund Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a non-for-profit organisation providing reproductive healthcare in the US, on September 18<sup>th</sup> (New York Times 2015). As written by Amelia Bonow on her personal Facebook page and also on a dedicated website, the hashtag seeks to destigmatise abortion contesting the ‘common’ belief that ‘it is something to be whispered about’. The selection of the term *shouting* was a clear opposition to whispering and an attempt to make women’s stories of abortion public, pushing what is considered a private matter into the ‘public’ arena (New York Times 2015; La Cagna 2015).

The aim of SYA was to reclaim a space in which women could share their experiences using their own terms. As stated on the website, the goal was to show that “abortion is normal. Our stories are ours to tell.” The initiative was successful (see Table 1) and women started sharing their own experiences, including cases of domestic violence, rape but also many mundane cases of unplanned pregnancies. Vitriolic reactions appeared almost immediately, including death threats to Bonow, who was forced to hide and seek protection from Seattle Police Department and the FBI (La Cagna 2015).

The controversial nature of SYA and its extreme consequences, attracted media attention which galvanises the debates around abortion, feminism and women rights. Rallies, meetings, protests and other events followed and are recorded on the dedicated website in which SYA is described as a ‘movement’. As the website’s intent is to collate experiences and initiatives supporting women, who had an abortion, there is no space for debating. Given our interest in understanding the phenomenon of polarization, segregation and separation online, we look at the evolution of discussions as they emerged around the hashtag only. We are not as interested in the content of the discussion, as we are in the trajectory of interactions and various processes therein, including negotiation of identities, normativity, and such. Due to this focus, the topic of abortion is not in the main frame of our analysis, but rather the ways in which it is described, defined and discussed and the processes behind such descriptions, definitions and discussions.

Figure 1 (also table 1 and 2) show the frequency distribution of the hashtag over time, which, in line with similar hashtags, is represented by a long tail distribution, typical of contentious hashtags (Hookway and Grahman 2017). The initial peak lasting approximately 4 days (21<sup>st</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> of September) declines rapidly, followed by a long period of low activity, from October 2015 to the present.

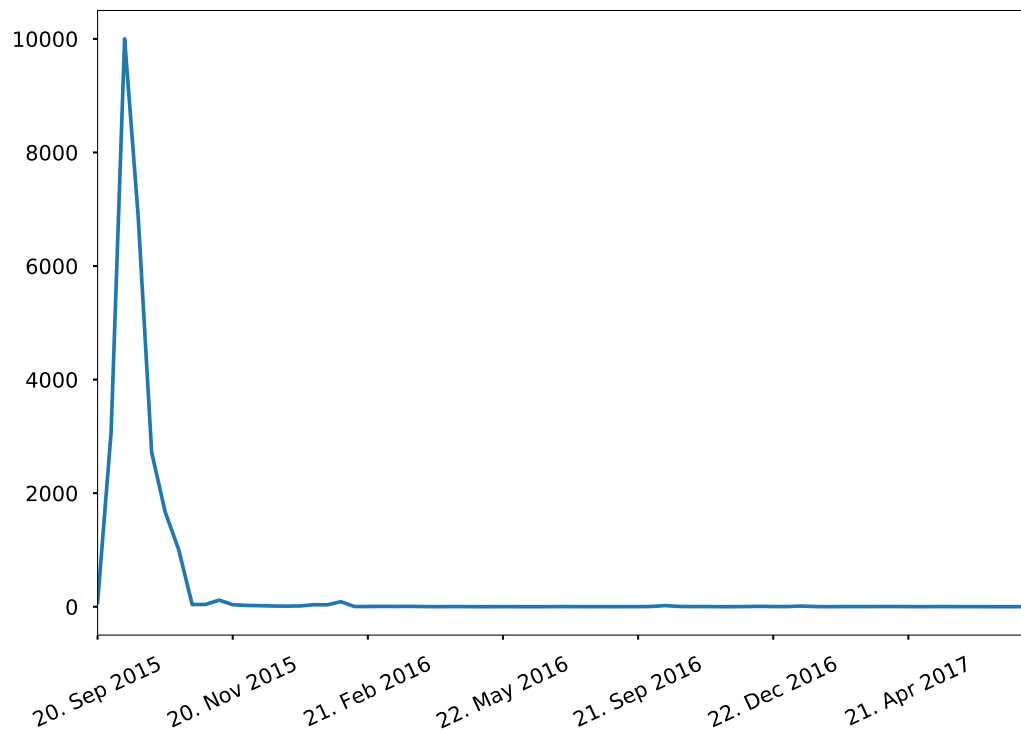


Figure 1. frequency distribution for SYA hashtag.

Previous studies have highlighted how hashtags initiated by feminists with the intent of making public various gender matters, are hijacked and trolled ‘by those who are trying to regain control’ over such discussions (Antonakis-Nashif 2015:106). Ferree (2012) speaks of ridiculing, victim blaming, and victimising as techniques of silencing women’s discussions. According to these studies, techniques of silencing, trolling and hijacking are *external* practices enacted by ‘others’ who simply do not belong to the culture of the hashtag (Clark 2016; Baer 2016). A similar analysis could have been offered for this hashtag, in which the sudden inactivity of SYA could have been explained by the activities of others. This can also be demonstrated by the success of SYA website, which is currently used as a safe environment in which women’s stories are narrated. Without denying that this is a plausible analysis, and that ‘silencing’ techniques can create a toxic online environment (Thelandersson 2014), we think that considering them simply as external practices, operated by an undetermined “twitter audience” (Clark 2016: 798), might hide some of the complexities surrounding interactions in/around contentious hashtags. As such, we put back these techniques operated by others into the main narrative of the hashtag, since they provide various degrees of counterarguments and

contribute to the articulation of various positions with regard to this contested social-cultural issue.

As we are interested in looking at the narrative trajectory of the hashtag, we paid particular attention to the first week in which an intense activity was observed.

	<b>PERSONAL STORIES</b>	<b>EXPERT OPINION</b>	<b>MEDIA STORIES</b>	<b>PERSONAL OPINION</b>	<b>IGNORE</b>
<b>20. SEP 2015</b>	34.21%	1.32%	13.16%	46.05%	5.26%
<b>21. SEP 2015</b>	17.97%	1.66%	8.72%	62.14%	9.51%
<b>22. SEP 2015</b>	8.94%	4.09%	11.69%	54.85%	20.43%
<b>23. SEP 2015</b>	8.36%	3.89%	10.78%	48.68%	28.29%
<b>24. SEP 2015</b>	6.18%	5.85%	17.94%	41.25%	28.79%
<b>25. SEP 2015</b>	9.81%	6.22%	17.00%	49.13%	17.83%
<b>26. SEP 2015</b>	3.97%	10.13%	17.28%	41.41%	27.21%
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>12.78%</b>	<b>4.74%</b>	<b>13.79%</b>	<b>49.07%</b>	<b>19.62%</b>
<b>MEDIAN</b>	<b>8.94%</b>	<b>4.09%</b>	<b>13.16%</b>	<b>48.68%</b>	<b>20.43%</b>

*Table 3. Codes for week 1 (in %).*

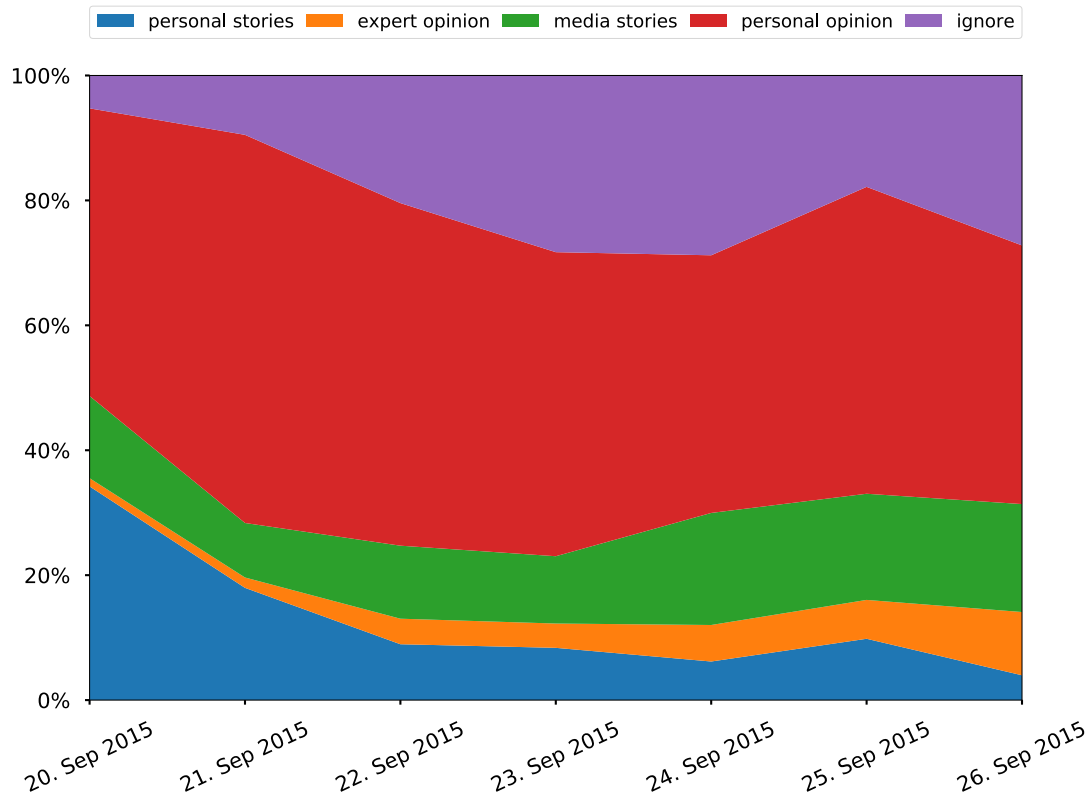


Figure 2. Codes for week 1 (in %).

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the evolution of the discussion during the first week. Stories narrating personal experiences of abortion constitute over 30% for the first day, but they are considerably fewer during subsequent days, being less than 4% in the last day. Such a reduction is balanced with an increasing number of tweets discussing U.S national news (media stories) and tweets reporting views of religious, secular and scientific authorities (expert opinion). The category of unrelated tweets (ignore) increases with a growing number of advertisements and tweets with commercial intent. Despite the increase of excluded tweets, ‘personal opinion’ remains the largest category over time. We noticed that the tone of these tweets become increasingly aggressive, often containing insults and accusations. Opinions also moved away from commenting on personal stories to discuss broader issues, including the importance of talking about abortion in public. The overall increase of the categories ‘personal opinion’, ‘media stories’, and ‘expert opinion’ shows that the initial aim of the hashtag to discuss intimate stories of abortion was reshaped, so that the overall conversation become more abstract and dogmatic. Tweets stating opinions continue to dominate over time (Table 4). Despite the limited activity of the hashtag, the overall distribution of categories broadly reflects the one observed at end of the first week. Aggressive opinions on abortion dominates the hashtag, while



tweets to be ignored are around the 20%. We think that the high number of personal stories in 2016 is due to events in January 2016 celebrating the anniversary of the decision of the Federal Supreme Court to legalise abortion nationwide. Another similar outlier was noticed in October 2015, probably in response to the national pro-life protests against Planned Parenthood Federation of America. The decrease of ‘expert opinion’ and ‘media stories’ in 2015 and 2016 is probably due to the limited activity of the hashtags which fails to generate an informed debate based on ‘knowledges’.

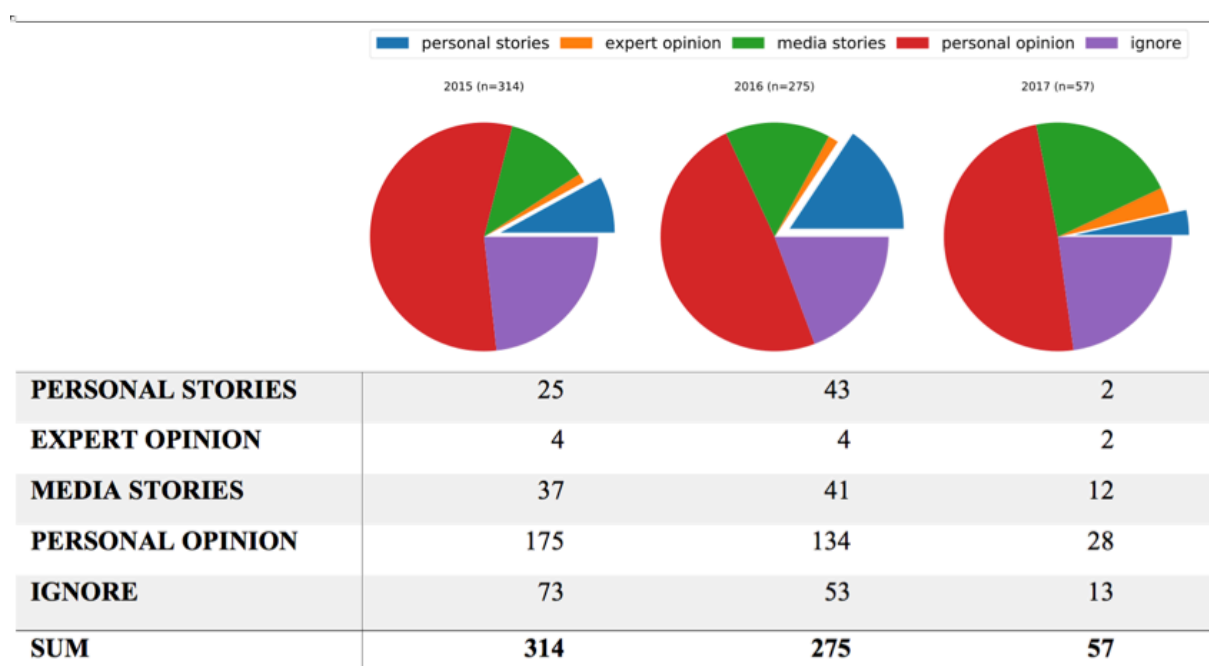


Table 4. Codes for coded tweets 2015 (Oct-Dec), 2016 (Jan-Dec), and 2017 (Jan-Aug).

## Bordering: Positioning and becoming

SYA acted as a storytelling prompt, providing a frame for women willing to disclose their stories in 140 characters or less. The structure of the personal stories aimed at pushing abortion into the public domain, is remarkably similar, but open-ended enough to allow women to customise their narratives (see also Clark 2016). The analysis of these personal stories shows the repetition of ritualistic elements including details of the event, the emotional implications of opting for an abortion and, often, women current circumstances. Despite such a repetition, interlocutors could express a variety of identity positions via their personal stories – being victims of rape, teenagers with an unexpected pregnancy, women in abusive relationships and

mothers unable to have another child- which were all aligned around the intent of destigmatising abortion. Such intent is visible in a matter-of-fact tone of many tweets in the frame ‘personal stories’, for example, *“I already felt my family was complete after two children. I didn’t think I could handle any more, and I had other avenues I wanted to pursue”* (cited in The Telegraph 2015), or *“My abortion was in 2008. It saved my life and allowed me to escape an abusive, emotionally and physically violent man #ShoutYourAbortion.”* (cited in The Daily Mail 2015).

The use of personal narratives to juxtapose the oversimplification of choices available to women has been shown in various feminist works on domestic abuse (Clark 2016; Antonakis-Nashif 2015) highlighting the centrality of victims’ stories for the construction of the identity of a battered woman (Rothenberg, 2002). Here, we see how poisoning is not mainly centred on the identity of a victim, but rather on a more complex narrative of various self-reflective identities reclaiming a space to make a choice public and to destigmatise such a choice. Amongst these narratives there also interlocutors (men and women alike) who have not directly experienced abortion, but illustrate their own experiences of supporting women who had one. These are stories of friends and relatives and professionals working in hospitals. An illustrative tweet is: *“My wife and I had an abortion when she was in college,” Twitter user jkCallawayYAY wrote Monday. “15 years later we’re still together w/ 2 beautiful sons #NoRegret #ShoutYourAbortion* (cited in The Daily Mail 2015). There are also examples of women who admit not having had an abortion, but willing to consider one. If previous works (see for example Antonakis-Nashif 2015) have defined these stories as marginal to the ‘main’ narrative of the hashtag under study, we do think that these are indeed part of a complex and articulated narrative in which various lines and positionings coexist. For example, in disclaiming that they have not experienced an abortion, these interlocutors draw a division line between themselves and women who had abortion. As such they align themselves to a specific position regarding the possibility of having an abortion, while at the same time distancing themselves from some aspects of that position.

A more marked division line is emerging in analysis personal stories ‘shouting back’ at the previously illustrated accounts of abortion. These are accounts of personal experiences of women who have adopted children, stories of children whose mothers opted out of abortion and stories of women who decided not to practice an abortion. For example, one writes: *“As an adopted child myself, I’m saddened and disgusted that #ShoutYourAbortion is trending”*

(cited in The Daily Mail 2015). As the tweet indicates, such personal stories do not seek to provoke a discussion, but rather stating, often with aggressive tones, a different perspective and a different story. This heterogeneous set of experiences are presented as a counterargument to abortion, creating a division line in which various identities (an adopting mother, a woman opting out of abortion, an adopted child) could be coherently aligned. Others have conceptualised counterarguments as a technique of silencing and hijacking contentious hashtags (Antonakis-Nashif 2015; Ferree 2012). In our case, these counterarguments are examples of how dividing lines are evoked and how categories of in/exclusion are negotiated and aligned (Brambilla 2015). In shouting back stories, these interlocutors are not silencing the debate, but rather redefining the boundaries of discussion, the purpose of the hashtag and their own non/belonging to such a contentious space.

The analysis of the four frames reveals a variety of overlapping options, which are often defined in a dichromic relationship with some others, creating a complex map of positions and division lines. For example, there are comments aggressively condemning women's sexual behaviour and defying abortion as a consequence of women's promiscuity. Some have a sarcastic tone, while others have a religious sensibility and often are directed to a specific story in which the choice of abortion was illustrated. Most of these comments tend to be written from a male point of view, but there are also some written by women with reference to values of American Republican party and Catholicism. Consider a few cited in the media coverage of SYA. One man tweeted: *'Look at me! I irresponsibly got pregnant & didnt have the guts to birth the kid, so I killed it! Reward me for my bravery! #ShoutYourMurder.'* Another said: *'Are you proud to have burned that little baby girl?!?!?!?!? Are you proud looking at her lifeless body?!? #ShoutYourAbortion #ShoutYourMurder'* (cited in The Daily Mail 2015). Yet another stated: *"#ShoutYourAbortion gives a new meaning to macabre."* (cited in The New York Times, 2015).

In contrast to these comments, we locate the ones supporting individual stories or the overall initiative of making abortion a public discussion. Often these comments express disapproval of tweets against women, accusing men of trivialising women's experience and contesting men's right to participate in the hashtag conversation. Many of these comments address more than one position at the time. For example, some criticise the masculine and aggressive tone of supporters of the Catholic church, the American conservative culture and the pro-life movement revealing a complex identity position. The complexity of these overlapping

categories (i.e. being a woman, atheist and pro-choice; being a father of an adopted child, Democratic and pro-life) shows that there is not a pre-existent main narrative, but rather positions and lines that are drawn and re-drawn depending on the emerging positions. Many of these comments are examples of ridiculing, blaming and victimising techniques, but rather than seeing them as examples of a ‘twitter audience’ (Clark 2016) or as a disruption to a pre-determined main narrative (Antonakis-Nashif 2015), we see these as examples of overlapping positions that, when at play, generate fluid lines of non/belonging.

### **Re- asserting normativity**

Bordering is not only a matter of asserting and negotiating non/belonging, but it is also a process of re-stating normativity and asserting morality. Studies looking at how social media contribute to the construction and depiction of moralities, have pointed out how people use web 2.0 technologies to communicate moral identities and positions (Hookway 2018; Hookway and Graham 2017; Sauter 2014). In particular Hookway (2018) shows how social media are used as a way of assessing moral experiences via a DIY morality, which is not centred around a code of rules or an external law, but rather a set of self-practices. This is indeed the case of tweets in which personal stories are narrated also as an assertion of a reflexive self who assesses her own experiences via a configuration of principles including individual choice, authenticity and emotions (see also Sauter 2014). The following tweet-story cited in *The New York Times* (2015) illustrates the point: *Ms. Sinreich, who now has a 6-year-old son, first posted on Twitter in September: “In 1988 a late-term abortion got a teenage me back on track for college, career, & motherhood.” She followed up with another post: “It’s been over 25 years and I’ve never regretted my decision not to become a teenage mom.”*

As these tweets do not refer to external guidelines but to a DIY principles of a “lay morality” (Sayer, 2011), establishing normativity becomes intertwined with the process of identity construction and position. Experiences are framed and self-assessed considering the specific situation and circumstances (i.e. age, economic situation, type of relationship) and the following a “lay morality” (i.e. doing the right thing for me). The use of words regrets, shame, guilt and pride shows how the centrality of a reflective self whose choices are contextualised and evaluated. As such the application of a DIY morality is based on rejecting external guidelines, while at the same time, affirming the authority of the self, and its ideals and choices

(Sayer 2011). The emphasis on contextual elements indicated how morality becomes an identity project to be designed also in relation to the others.

As external guidelines are excluded, the relational and evaluative dimensions of a DIY morality become visible in the way interlocutors are responsive to actions and emotions of others. For example, the experiences of other interlocutors are evaluated according to the way they are faring in particular circumstances, and consequentially condemned or applauded. The analysis shows a range of evaluations which range from expressing disgust (described in terms of bodily repulsion) and using terms like “murders” and “homicide”, to the ones supporting abortion but criticizing the making of such stories public. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the tweets displaying raw antagonistic emotions, rather than supportive of women’s choice, are typically reproduced in the media, which tends to build new stories on conflict and provocation. For example, *“When did making someone else pay dearly for your mistakes become empowerment for women? What a weak, shameless tag. smh #shoutyourabortion”* and *“Abortion does not make you unpregnant. It makes you the parent of a dead child,”* Twitter user AmyMek wrote (cited in CNN 2015).

To be sure, there are many comments supportive of the initiative and the choices made by women opted for an abortion, which appears of little value to the news media. These opinions related to personal stories or stories of others, echo Bauman (1993:12) theorising of morality as an expression of the “autonomous responsibility of the moral self” establishing what is right and wrong for the self and the others.

Although DIY morality dominates the re-establishing of normativity, there are also references to external authorities to communicate moral positions and to restate belonging. The use of external sources and authorities is not directed to evaluate narratives, but rather to provide moral guides and restate principles that are removed from specific circumstances. Quotations from the Bible, from saints and religious authorities are used without any comments or references to specific aspects of the discussion. Used to restate principles – often against abortion- these quotes define categories of belonging by re-establish positions of right and wrong, good and bad, the us and the other. There are also references to the US constitution and the past presidents of the US who supported abortion, repositioning it as a legal option and an ethical choice for women. These religious and secular authorities (in forms of documents such as the Bible and the constitutions, but also key historic figures) are used to move away from a

DIY morality (Hookway 2018; Bauman 1993) to a morality following rules and principles removed from individual autonomy.

References to historical data, statistics and biological and medical sources, are also used as authoritative sources, but, unlike religious ones, these are often commented upon and applied to evaluate specific circumstances and cases. One example is “*Before abortion was legal, 5000+ women died every years. anti-choices have no business calling themselves "pro life". #ShoutYourAbortion.*” (cited in the *Daily Mail* 2015). Arguably, the use of data and external references represents a compromise between the “lay morality” based only on empathy and other emotions (Sayer, 2011) to a morality based on knowledges. However, external authorities and knowledges are used to restate a specific position also in relation to others. As such they do not simply define the moral self (Hookway 2018), but they define the self relationally drawing lines of right and wrong, inclusion and exclusion and non/belonging.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In this article, we explored a case of a contentious hashtag, using the concept of *borderscapes* as the theoretical lens. We traced the narrative trajectory of this hashtag and the multiplicity of publics (Fraser 1990) therein, noting the ways the dividing lines between the us and the others are continuously drawn and redrawn. Thus, we aimed to provide a more nuanced understanding of polarization and partisan selectivity online, the processes that hinder interactions with socio-cultural others (Bump 2016; Sunstein 2017). The theoretical lens of *borderscapes* allowed us to demonstrate how hashtags are relational spaces of fluid and temporal social exchanges between variegated, dispersed, and often contradictory publics (Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 2014; 2015; Brambilla 2015). Our findings reveal the complexity of un/doing of symbolic lines, and demonstrate that a contentious hashtag does not simply replicate pre-existing positions, identities and orders from “outside” (see Clark 2016; Baer 2016). In contrast to current views that contentious feminist hashtags are hijacked by trolls via silencing techniques replicating unequal power structures (Antonakis-Nashif 2015; Ferree 2012), our findings show that such techniques need to be considered as a part of the hashtag-ed social exchange, as they are implicated in articulations of discord, opposition, and rivalries, but also empathies, alignments, and solidarities. Therefore, rather than seeing conflicts and violent contestations as external elements from the exchange with a particular hashtag, we see them as an integral part of it, even when, like in the case of SYA, they drastically restructured the conversation

and precipitated its end. As an empirical case of an extreme rivalry, SYA makes visible the doing and undoing of lines of in/exclusion, through three main mechanisms: positions, belonging and re-stating normativity.

Current research on hashtag affirms the centrality of hashtags as sorting devices as well as tools of self-formation, via narratives of narcissistic or self-obsessive accounts of the ordinary and extraordinary events of life (Sauter 2014; Robards and Lincoln 2016; Yang 2016). Our analysis shows more complex narratives in which identities are positioned at a relational level, located in categories and terms negotiated and articulated around the key themes of a contentious hashtag. That is, elements of identity emerge relationally and contingently, as formulated for the specific viewpoint around abortion, including being an adopted child, the partner of someone who had an abortion, a catholic mother with adopted children, a Republican from the south of the US, a feminist campaigner supporting Planned Parenthood and so on. Considering how these revelations emerges around a specific social matter, they locate a person in relation to the us and the other, while constructing lines of differentiation and ordering. As these lines are created in social exchange, they constitute a more fluid us and other; that is the encounters can generate unexpected alignments. For example, some interlocutors of Planned Parenthood are aligned with more conservative viewers with the idea of keeping abortion as a ‘private’ matter. Generally, our findings suggest that the others is not a monolithic and stable category, but a complex articulation of disparities generated an array of different encounters possible on social media. Re-defining the us and the others implies re-defining non/belonging to specific groups, characterised by practices, beliefs, and ideals, which are labelled by interlocutors as ‘pro-choice’, ‘pro-abortion’, ‘taxpayers’, ‘Democrats’, ‘Republicans’, ‘adopted children’ and so on. Far from being homogeneous, these labels are often used as a reference to justify at once the belonging and the othering of the opponents. Lines of differentiation are also established through restating normativity, expressing DIY morality on what is right and wrong, good and bad. Subjectivities are produced around different knowledges (religious, historical, scientific) employed to restate and/or bolster moral principles, as well as defining the others as deficient for their perceived deviation from such principles. Excluded from fundamental principles, the others are seen as lacking, and their practices evoke pity, compassion, disgust, but also violent reaction in a form of repression and physical violence.

Overall, by employing the concept of *borderscapes* to examine a contentious hashtag, our study advances the understanding of acculturation on social media, in two main ways. First, it shows

how we cannot fully understand the terms of belonging, definitive of acculturation, if we do not unpack the mechanism of othering. Borders and boundaries are pivotal to this process. As Fawcett observed in 1918 “the boundary is the place of intercourse with the foreigner” (in Newam and Paasi 1998:186), and it is in social exchanges with the other that “the us” identity is drawn out and articulated. In our study, we have shown how hashtags are bordering spaces, where the us and the other are revealed, they are not stable but in becoming. Thus, hashtags have a constitutive role; particularly when concerned with socially-politically divisive issues, they can be conceived as sites for articulation, adaptation, and contestations of ideas, identities, and non/belonging. In Brambilla (2015) words, they are “both *markers of belonging* and *places of becoming*.” Then as a (social) ordering tool hashtag is ambivalent: both a representation of boundaries as well as individual and collective practice of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of boundaries of belonging and the others. Second, in showing how the other is not fixed or monolithic, we expose a multitude of dividing lines, some seem clearly defined and firmly set, whereas others are fuzzy and fleeting. Furthermore, lines are constructed by drawing on a multiplicity of knowledges and normative parameters, none of which, it would appear, are beyond contestation. Put differently, our analysis suggests that hashtag is ‘the intersection of competing and even conflicting tensions,’ (Brambilla 2015), as such a site to question the normativity of established social-cultural categories (central to acculturation). This questioning is not necessarily destructive, instead could arguably foster new understandings and open possibilities for allyship. Further research is needed to unpack the role of hashtags as *borderscapes* in defining individual identities, and how these social media expressive devices, as well as practices they harness, work to shift subjectivities when used in defending certain (social) ‘territories’.

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